

Talking Points

Signing of UpGrade Education bills

Saltillo High School

Tuesday, March 27, 2006

When I first introduced the concept of UpGrade Education, I stressed that education is the state's number one priority. It's the number one economic development issue and the number one quality of life issue in our state.

We spend 62 percent of our budget on education. Thanks to a multi-year commitment our public school teachers are making 30 percent more than five years ago. State spending on K-12 education is 7.2 percent, or \$143 million, higher than last year. Per student spending in our public schools is more than \$7,000 this year, a record amount.

And, after several year of declining spending, we are finally appropriating more funding for universities and community colleges.

Building a stronger education system has always been about more than money.

UpGrade is not about funding; it's about fundamentals. The bills I am signing here today are integral pieces of a concept that has become a reality.

These proposals under the umbrella of the UpGrade Education reforms were developed with strong support from my 250 member Teachers Advisory Commission. I thank them for their willingness to delve into the details of the process by which our children are prepared for the future.

I believe the bills enacted by the Legislature this year under UpGrade are good policy and will significantly improve education in Mississippi in many ways:

- Liberate successful schools from repetitive bureaucracy. Schools that achieve Level 4 and 5 accreditation ratings ought to be free from some of the cumbersome oversight from Jackson (such as staff development plans filed and approved; performance review criteria; and the opening and closing days of school). As a result, the State Department of Education can better focus its resources on the lower performing schools where the attention is most needed.

- Home rule. Home rule is about giving all districts the operational freedom they need to do what we all are working toward: higher student achievement. Before this change, local leaders had to seek the Legislature's approval on changes, which was a stumbling block to thinking outside the box. With the passage of UpGrade, local educators now have the freedom, authority, and

explicit encouragement to think and act creatively to raise student achievement.

- Focus on dropout prevention. Nearly 40 percent of Mississippi school children drop out before they graduate. UpGrade creates a position within the Department of Education whose responsibility it will be to dramatically lower this number in the next three years.

- Prioritize teacher recruitment and retention. Nothing is as important as a quality teacher in every classroom. That is why UpGrade includes the following policies:

- Establishment of a teacher pay for performance program that rewards schools that show the greatest increases in student test scores from year to year.

- Discipline in the classroom is a big problem in many schools, particularly in middle schools. As my Teachers Advisory Committee has told me, more young teachers leave teaching over discipline than over pay. That is why I supported the establishment of a middle school mentor teacher corps that would pay \$1,000 to teachers who were willing to serve in this capacity

- Redesign high schools. A recent national report suggested that 75 percent of high school dropouts did so with passing grades, shattering the myth that they couldn't handle the academics (Gates Foundation). The facts are that students become disengaged and are not challenged by the curriculum.

UpGrade makes significant changes by doing the following:

- Establishes a dual credit system. Beginning next school year, if a student here at Saltillo wants to take a math or science class needed for graduation at Tupelo's Advanced Education Center (where Ole Miss, MUW, and Itawamba Community College offer courses) they can do so and earn credit towards their college degree at the same time.
- Requires that Advance Placement (AP) courses be made available in every school district
- Creates the Mississippi Virtual Public School where students can take courses for credit that might not be offered in their own school. This initiative takes advantage of investments in public education by corporations to expand the use of technology, online education and distance learning so every child can have access to the best education.

These were several of the major goals of my UpGrade Education reform package.

I believe these bills will result in increased learning and as I stated, that's what matters most.

We must constantly pursue innovative, creative policies that help us achieve greater increases in learning.

UpGrade does that.